

# Knife River Indian Villages

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Knife River Indian Villages  
National Historic Site



## Moccasins in the Robinson Collection

### Introduction

George and Janet Robinson came to the Dakotas in 1883 and opened a mercantile store on the Fort Berthold Reservation where they traded with the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara. Because of their fair trading practices and genuine respect of the local American Indian groups, the Robinsons and their children were adopted by the Arikara, and exchanged many gifts with some of the Indians they did business with.

George and Janet's grandchildren decided that the best use of these gifts was to make the collection available through donation. Among this collection is a series of moccasins made around the turn of the twentieth century. These moccasins give us a unique look into early reservation era arts and handicraft. Gifts like the Robinsons' allow us to learn from rare and unique items that might otherwise be unavailable.

### Quillwork and Beadwork



KNRI 2167

Traditionally, women would decorate items with porcupine quills colored with natural dyes. The bright pinks and oranges in the pair to the top left were probably colored with synthetic dyes, which became widely available in the 1850s. By the reservation era, quillwork was largely replaced by beadwork. Only two pairs of moccasins in the Robinson Collection are decorated with quillwork.

Before the arrival of Europeans, women used beads made out of natural objects like bones or shells. The use of glass seed beads is a fairly recent development in the American Indian repertoire. With the arrival of European traders, glass beads became a favorite trade item and are usually the most common artifacts found at historic sites.

Women realized that glass beads were easier to work with than quills. Although beadwork is still a meticulous and time consuming task, it is nowhere near as difficult as quillwork. The demand for beads increased, and the amount of quillwork decreased. As trade increased, more colors became available. Most beads were valuable, but blue beads were especially popular. The deep blue color found on glass trade beads could not be duplicated from materials found in nature, so blue trade beads were prized. When Lewis and Clark arrived at the Hidatsa and Mandan villages, they found that only their white and blue beads were highly sought and that the smaller the bead the more valuable it was.



KNRI 2139



KNRI 2160

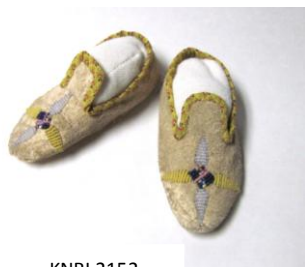


KNRI 2153

## Geometric Designs and Floral Motifs



KNRI 2137



KNRI 2152



KNRI 2165

The pair of moccasins on the top left has an inverted triangle and feather design. This geometric design, along with the pattern on the middle left, is common among Plains tribes. But the designs on the moccasins at the bottom and on the right have floral and leaf designs that are more common in the Woodlands tribes. In fact there are only two pairs of moccasins in the Robinson collection that have the geometric patterns. The Arikara tribe largely used floral motifs and geometric floral patterns. The Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara all traded heavily and widely, long before contact with Euro-Americans. The designs and patterns seen in their crafts show the influences of their trade partners. Through trading with the eastern tribes, the floral motifs started to become more and more apparent in Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara designs. There was a constant merging and reinterpretation of styles because of trade and gift giving.

The designs on moccasins were closely tied with the woman making them. Some of the designs came to her in dreams, or symbolized an important event. Some designs belonged to her family and were passed down from one generation to the next. Many items were simply decorated with the individual's personal style and taste.



KNRI 2130

All of the moccasins in the Robinson collection are elaborately decorated. Moccasins that were this intricately adorned were not for everyday use. They were special occasion footwear made to commemorate an event, used for a ceremony, or to be given as a gift.



KNRI 2164

## Euro-American Influence

As the Europeans arrived, the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara adapted their designs to European influences. The pair below has the traditional Woodland's floral designs but the flowers look like tulips, a flower native to Central Asia.



KNRI 2136

The moccasin below is a very interesting mix of Native American and Euro-American fashion. It is a non-traditional girl's moccasin that looks much like popular women's shoes of the 1900's with the six button closure, but still has green, red, blue and white beading in a flower and berry pattern.



KNRI 2154

The flower on the pair above is either an oriental or corn flower poppy. Poppy flowers are Eurasian in origin and were a common symbol of remembrance for veterans at the time this pair of moccasins was made.



KNRI 2125